The role of shared social identity in mutual support among refugees of conflict: An ethnographic study of Syrian refugees in Jordan

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The Role of Shared Social Identity in Mutual Support Among Refugees of Conflict: An Ethnographic Study of Syrian Refugees in Jordan

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Abstract

In the midst of an unprecedented refugee crisis and the shortfall of aid organization resources, a shift toward utilizing the capacity for collective resilience in refugee communities could be helpful. This paper explores experiences of psychosocial social support among a community of Syrian urban refugees in Jordan, especially the kind of support that helps them deal with secondary stressors. We were specifically interested in the role of shared social identity as a basis of support and the sources of such shared identity. We conducted an 8-month ethnography that included observations and semi-structured interviews with 13 refugees. We found many examples of support among refugees, on both personal and collective levels. Some of this support was based on sharing the identity of "refugee" that stemmed from a sense of common fate. This is similar to the process identified in the literature on disasters. Psychological membership in the refugee group is stigmatic, but it can also lead to positive outcomes in line with the social cure perspective. However, we also found examples of support that were value-based or based on pre-existing interpersonal networks. Implications of the findings for models of group processes in stressful situations and the practical question of refugee support are discussed.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, armed conflict, social identity, psychosocial support, social cure, secondary stressors, empowerment, ethnography.

The magnitude of the current forced displacement crisis is unmatched since World War II. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report (2016a), there are now more than 65 million people who have been forced to leave their homes, and the numbers are increasing rapidly as more than 12 million people were displaced in the year 2015 alone. There are more than 20 million refugees registered with the UNHCR, and the majority of them are located in developing countries and are not expected to return for many years. In the context of a shortfall of aid organization resources, a shift toward understanding and utilizing the psychosocial capacities in refugee communities could be helpful. The study described in this paper therefore sought to explore the experience of psychosocial support among a community of Syrian urban refugees in Jordan. We were specifically interested in the role of shared social identity as a basis of support for dealing with secondary stressors in an urban setting, and the sources of such shared identity. To address this issue, we conducted an eight-month ethnography that included observations and semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 refugees.

The Syrian displacement crisis

A large part of the steep rise in forced displacements is caused by armed conflicts in the Middle East, where Syria alone is responsible for more than 4.9 million refugees and 6.6 million Internally Displaced People (IDPs) during the period of March 2011 - June 2016. Most Syrian refugees are hosted in the neighbouring countries, namely Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey (UNHCR, 2016a). The protracted displacement situation comes with serious challenges to the emergency intervention model that succeeds in saving lives but struggles to provide livelihoods to the refugees in the host countries, where in some cases a refugee gets aid as low as $14 a

month (World Food Programme, 2015) with restrictions on work. The UNHCR data shows that most refugees live in urban settings rather than refugee camps, which means increased pressure on the infrastructures of host countries, especially in countries where refugees comprise a relatively large portion of the total population, like Lebanon which hosted 183 refugees per 1000 inhabitants in 2015 (UNHCR, 2016a).

The challenges arising from protracted displacement were analysed in a recent review of the literature, which found a wide range of secondary stressors among the refugees (Alfadhli & Drury, 2016). These secondary stressors (Lock et al., 2012) do not directly arising from the emergency (war), but are socially mediated (i.e., a function of social organization subsequent to the war). These stressors fall into three main groups (Alfadhli & Drury, 2017): financial stressors (including poverty, poor housing, education and health expenses), environmental stressors (including documentation issues, moving into an unfamiliar environment and suffering from instability) and social stressors (including separation from relatives, prejudice, discrimination and exploitation).

On top of these challenges on the ground, the resources available to respond to such challenges are far from adequate. The UNHCR Syrian crisis response plan funds only half of the needed budget (UNHCR, 2016b). This situation should make us consider all available resources to help refugees in developing countries, such as the refugees' own informal social support capacities, a notion suggested by some approaches to collective resilience (e.g., Fielding & Anderson, 2008). In the following, we will discuss a number of sources suggesting that *psychological group memberships* are an important basis for such capacities in communities and ad hoc gatherings. Since psychological group memberships are a function of shared social

identity, the social identity approach, and specifically recent work on the 'social cure', might be relevant to understand some of the processes of psychosocial support in the refugee community.

Social groups and identities as possible psychosocial resources for refugee communities

Shared social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) could be the basis of mutual support among refugees to face their stressful environment, at both practical and psychological levels. Social identity can be the basis for giving support in groups, in addition to having many positive outcomes on wellbeing (e.g., coping, health behaviours and clinical outcomes; Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Studies suggest that social identity transition is a key concept to understand the effect of stressful events on wellbeing, as for example in the case of international students during life transitions where loss of social identity had a negative impact on their wellbeing (Praharso, Tear, & Cruwys, 2017). Identity transitions are clear in the case of refugees who receive a new label (official status) once they arrive to the host country, and have to acknowledge this label in order to receive services (e.g., food coupons from UNHCR).

Research on group processes in disasters (see Drury, 2012) suggests a possible process whereby circumstances create an emergent "refugee" identity which could perhaps be a base for psychosocial support among refugees, and hence a possible source of efficacy. A study of survivors of the 2005 London bombings suggested that shared social identity (SSI) emerged among strangers through common fate; this emergent SSI was the basis of helping behaviour among these strangers (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2009). Shared social identity was found to be a predictor of both expected support and coordinated support among survivors of the Chile earthquake of 2010 (Drury, Brown, González, & Miranda, 2016). Also, Vezzali, Versari, Cadamuro, Trifiletti, and Di Bernardo (2016) found that sharing distress increases identification,

which suggests the relevance for refugees facing secondary stressors. In all these studies, it appears that seeing oneself as a member of an affected community can create expectations of support which turn individuals into active agents capable of giving help and coordinating with others to achieve common goals. The London bombings study informed a field guide that takes this capacity for informal collective resilience into consideration in emergency humanitarian planning (NATO, 2008). This document is intended for "Major Incidents, Conflict, Disasters and Terrorism", which implies similarity between these different settings. However, the armed conflicts setting can be different in regard to both the type of stressors and the emergent social identities that arise, which makes us a closer examination is necessary before applying the lessons learned from mass emergencies on armed conflicts.

The limitations of identities

The notion of shared identities as a resource for support among refugees is evident in some of the refugee literature (Alfadhli & Drury, 2016), though these accounts lack any psychological specification of the mechanisms involved, and only include an occasional and general reference to the possible origin of this shared identity in common circumstances (e.g., Moulin, 2010).

Moreover, while there is much research to show the benefits of group membership based on shared identity, not all identities have been shown to have this beneficial effect, and this might be especially true in the case of refugees. Thus the refugee label has a stigma attached to it as it is perceived as a lower status compared to locals and other nationalities, which is an example of identity as "social curse", rather than social cure. For example, perceived stigma among disadvantaged populations undermined their use of public services (Stevenson,

McNamara, & Muldoon, 2014). This tension between the potential benefits of the refugee status and the stigma attached to it could lead to negative effects on well-being, similar to what has been found among homeless people who internalized the stigmatic label while receiving services based on it (Walter, Jetten, Parsell, & Dingle, 2015). Thus the present study will examine how refugees orient to the "refugee" category: to what extent do they adopt it and use it to coordinate support amongst themselves or reject and instead draw upon other ways of categorizing themselves, or indeed other relationships, to deal with the secondary stressors they face.

Stigma may be one reason why the refugee identity may not easily be employed as a basis for mutual support. But there are other bases for support, such as the family, friendship or tribal network. When looking for sources for support in refugees of conflict communities, the literature points out the role of religion. In addition to helping the refugees cope with the distress of war and exile (Rangkla, 2013), its teachings also provide moral grounds for providing help (Admirand, 2014) and its institution's resources can facilitate that help (Zaman, 2012).

Therefore, the aims of the present study were precisely to look not just at the extent to which refugees developed a shared social identity but to examine where any such shared social identity was located as a source of support in relation to other sources, such as interpersonal/family relations, and the role of religion. Within this we examine the extent that refugees negotiated the possible stigma of the refugee identity and did or did not use the category as a basis for giving help and coordinating efforts, and the process underlying this. We therefore aimed to answer the following questions: First, what were the informal sources of support among the refugees? What were the supportive social relationships among refugees, and were social identities any part of these? Within this: what are the sources of these identities? Do they feel

common fate? In what contexts? Second, to what extent did refugees experience (give and receive) support to deal with the secondary stressors? In what forms and levels does this support come?

We approached these questions through an eight-month ethnographic exploration among a community of Syrian urban refugees in Jordan that included participant observations and in-depth interviews.

Method

Procedure

The ethnography took place from 29th of September 2015 to 30th of May 2016 in Irbid, a city on the Jordanian border with Syria, as the city hosts more than 130,000 Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2016b). In particular, most of the interview participants and the observations come from a neighbourhood known as "Daraa", named after the Syrian region that the refugee residents come from. The first author had the chance to embed himself in the neighbourhood by volunteering to teach in a school located in the middle of the three-kilometre neighbourhood and lived next to the neighbourhood. The researcher started doing interviews after two months of his arrival, and used the time to get familiar with the environment and gain the trust of the residents. By that time, children started greeting him on the streets by name and title "teacher", which was considered as an indication that his presence in the neighbourhood gained some legitimacy.

The school was set up for the children of the Syrian refugees and run by a non-profit student organization. In addition to teaching photography, the researcher also participated in administrative roles, which gave him the opportunity to interact with the students' parents and

families living around the school. The researcher kept a regular diary (21,062 words) that included information obtained through casual chats and observations he made in the neighbourhood, Syrian family homes, and while accompanying the refugees through activities such as shopping using food coupons, and getting necessary documents.

Interviews

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, we used semi-structured interviews. These gave space for the participants to tell their stories and experiences as refugees in Jordan, but also allowed us to ask them questions about topics that we were interested in, based on the literature. The interview started with an open question to the participant asking them to tell us about their experience as a refugee in Jordan. The interview schedule included questions about the following topics: how and when the participant became to see themselves as a refugee; relations with other refugees and other groups; change in social relations compared to pre-war; daily life needs and challenges and problems they face; the support available and the sources of it; and finally, about their wellbeing and any mental health issues.

The questions asked to the participants developed by adding new questions that emerged from observations and participant answers, or dropping old ones for topics that were judged to be saturated. For example, at the beginning of the fieldwork the first author was aware of only one type of refugee ID document, but as he started doing interviews, he learned about other types of documents and started asking about them. After a while, he stopped asking about the process of acquiring an identity document as the answers became redundant.

Interviews lasted between forty minutes to one hour; they were conducted in Arabic and audio recorded using the first author's phone. The researcher (who is a native Arabic speaker)

transcribed the interviews and then translated them to English.

Participants

The ethnography took place in a neighbourhood located in the city of Irbid on the northern Jordanian borders with Syria. All the interviewed refugees (Table 1) were residents of that neighbourhood or working in it. The researcher had some interaction with female Syrian refugees, but had less chance to do interviews with them due to cultural restrictions on cross-gender private meetings. He did two interviews with local Jordanian relief workers who worked with Syrian refugees from the beginning of the crises to check for other accounts regarding the stressors refugees face and their social dynamics.

-Insert Table 1-

Recruitment

To ensure a trust-based relation, the researcher introduced himself and his purpose as a researcher to possible participants when he met them for the first time, but allowed multiple meetings before inviting them for an interview. In some cases, the researcher was introduced to possible participants through a mutual friend (usually a volunteer).

Analytic approach

This analysis is guided by a rich literature about the conditions of refugees of conflict in developing countries and the literature on shared social identity-based support, which helped us both to clearly define the scope of study and generate precise research questions that this study seeks to answer. However, due to the fact that our research questions are also drawn from the literature on mass emergencies which is different from the setting of refugees of conflict, it

required a more careful and flexible approach to analysis that allowed us to identify both the similarities and differences between the two settings. Our thematic analysis was theory-driven with flexibility in coding process and generating themes (Lyons & Coyle, 2016). We had two main themes in mind (support and social relations), but other than that, we started coding the interview data from the lowest level possible and then identified the relations between codes and merged or split some of them, where needed. For example, we started screening interviews for examples of support, and then decided that a group of these examples has a common theme of *collective* help.

Ethics statement

The University of Sussex ethical review board approved the study on 9th of June 2015 (approval certificate number ER/KHTA20/3).

Analysis

First, we describe the levels of identification with other refugees among most of those who participated in providing social support (Table 2). We show how new social relations were created in the exile which were distinctively different (different regions and classes) from the pre-war situation. When asked about the roots of this identification, refugees said that it stems from the shared suffering as refugees (common fate). We also present a minority of cases who showed alternative sources of support, other than shared *refugee* identity.

Second, we explore the different forms of help reported by refugees and which we observed among them. We show that some of these were linked to the emergent refugee identity.

The extracts and observations we present in this section are chosen as being representative of statements found in the data set.

-Insert Table 2-

1. Social Relationships as Resources

We examined how refugees turned to their social relationships looking for sources of help. Among those who helped and received help, we found identification with other refugees, in spite of the clear stigma attached to it. Identification with other refugees appear to stem from the perception of common fate, which were evident in the contexts that treated the individuals as members of the "refugee" group.

1.1. Social relations dynamics The effect of crises on social relations varied from one refugee to another. One participant reported that his relations were restricted - as before – to the circle of relatives:

> Int: relations with Syrians?
>
> P2: Everybody mind his own business. Not that good. The strong relations are between relatives only. Other Syrians just say hi to them. (Extract 1, Participant 2, M late-30s)

Three other participants suffered a reduction in their number of relationships, which became limited to a small circle of friends and relatives due to the challenges of the displacement conditions:

> Before, relations were wide, but now it's tight. You cannot relax in relations, it comes with commitments which I cannot afford. So I keep it narrow with people who know me

> very well. If I have a guest I cannot avoid doing a feast [pause] that's our tradition. But with my close friends, a cup of tea will do it. Relations have shrunk a lot since the crisis. (Extract 2, Participant 10, M mid-50s)

However, more participants reported an interesting change in social relations due to the displacement environment:

> I never imagined that I would ever know people from areas like I do now. One positive aspect of the crisis is that it introduced us to the whole spectrum of the society, specifically after being a refugee. We used to say "Homsian or Daraan" but know we just say "Syrian" [pause] the sub-identities dissolved. (Extract 3, Participant 9, M early-40s)

Here, we see an example of one important effect of the displacement which caused a physical re-shuffle where refugees have little choice of where to live, which leads to exposure to refugees from more diverse backgrounds (different regions, tribes, and socio-economic status), than they are used to in their hometowns before the war. While displacement gets prolonged over the years, such exposure creates a new network of social relations.

1.2. Shared social identity As shown in the previous example, many participants showed high identification with other refugees, regardless of the region. In order to examine if the shared identity is a pre-war existing identity or an emergent identity from the situation of being a refugee, we had two pieces of evidence. First, there was the change in social relations to include more regions and classes than before, which is based on common fate:

> I do not discriminate between any Syrian refugees regardless of where they came from, Homs or Aleppo or Daraa, we all Syrians [pause] we have same problems, same worries,

> we open our hearts to each other [...] I noticed that my circle of relations has expanded a lot comparing to what it used to be in Syria, as now I have relations with all of Syrian society spectrum – intellectuals, teachers, doctors. My relations used to be restricted within my region [of origin] but now, in one place, I would be with people from Homs, Aleppo and Damascus, people I wouldn't meet back in Syria. (Extract 4, Participant 5, M mid-50s)

The first author witnessed some of these casual social meetings, which included some previous military people, a doctor, a politician professor, and a farmer, from different regions of Syria (Observation on April 22nd, 2016). In other occasions, I saw Syrians from rich families helping (money, teaching, treatment) poor Syrians from other regions (multiple observations in the school and aid distribution).

Second, some of them even identified with other refugees who are not Syrian, as in the following two interviews:

> I feel the other refugees' [pain], not only Syrian refugees, even Iraqi refugees. When I've heard in the news about refugees in Burma, I was very sad. I felt sorry for the Palestinian refugees who experienced this twice, once from Palestine to Syria and then from Syria to Jordan. I feel sympathy toward any human being who became a refugee. (Extract 5, Participant 7, F late-20s)

> Int: Any other groups that you feel belonging to?
>
> P12: Maybe Palestinians, as they feel what we feel and saw what we are seeing [pause] they know what it means to be a refugee. Their situation in Jordan is better than us, as

> they have been here longer than us, but at the same time they lost their home land, as we lost ours. We share the same pain. (Extract 6, Participant 12, M mid-20s)

Here, we can see evidence that a community of refugees is forming, beyond the mere physical proximity of the neighbourhood with its high concentration of Syrian refugees. The borders of the new group are set by a sense of membership and belonging in relation to other refugees; some of them were not considered ingroup before the war, and in some cases they are not even Syrians. This sense of shared identity is crucial to activate the newly formed social network to achieve the community (refugees' group) goals, as they share the same situation and challenges (secondary stressors).

However, not all Syrians identified with other refugees:

> Int: Do you feel belonging to the refugees in general?
>
> P4: No, I did not need many people.
>
> Int: Do you belong to refugees from your region more?
>
> P4: Damascus? No, in fact I stay away from them. (Extract 7, Participant 4, M mid-20s)

Many participants showed during the interview a negative attitude towards the label "refugee". Their reactions ranged from getting emotional when they thought of themselves as refugees to a total rejection to acknowledging that they are refugees (even those who are registered with UNHCR and are receiving aid). There was an obvious stigma attached to the "refugee" identity, which may have led the participants to use the "Syrian" identity instead of refugee in their casual conversations. Furthermore, in some cases the stigma was even attached to the national identity

of being "Syrian", as a Jordanian relief worker told us about an example of verbal discrimination toward Syrian refugees:

> Here, people still call a refugee as an example "Abu Ahmad the Syrian" "Om Ahmad the Syrian" "that Syrian boy". They say the name followed by "Syrian". The other day I met a man who asked me "why do they call me Syrian Abu Ahmad? My name is Abu Ahmad. Why do they have to remind me that I am Syrian?". I told him that they probably say it with good intentions. He said "but that affects me. I don't like it. I like to be called Abu Ahmad" (Extract 8, Participant 15, M late-20s, relief worker)

The first author noticed that some of the items (e.g., jacket or bag) refugees receive have the donor's logo on it, which could lead to being singled out as a refugee from others and thus creating such a stigma (Multiple observations).

As suggested in the interviews and observations, the identity of being a refugee appeared to invoke negative emotion among many participants. However, refusing the "refugee" label and denying it publicly should not necessarily be treated as a measure of disidentification with other refugees, as some participants did identify with other refugees and supported them while refusing to acknowledge the 'refugee' label and masked this shared identity with the national (Syrian) identity (participants 1, 2, 4 and 13). A central question of this study is regarding the role of shared social identity in support among the refugees, and based on the interview data, we found that shared social identity-based support was the most common kind of support described by participants. Seven (more than half) of the participants identified with other refugees as members of their group and provided support to them. Four participants (1, 2, 4 and 13) provided support to other Syrian refugees without acknowledging their membership to the refugee group, while

two participants (10 and 14) had limited relations with other refugees and were not engaged in social support activities (see Table 2).

1.3. Common fate – distal and proximal. When asked about the reason behind their identification with other refugees, interviewees pointed out that they share the same situation and suffering:

> Only we feel our pain. You cannot feel our own pain, but you can ask a Syrian and they would tell you. Unity is here because we share the same pain, the same injustice [pause] in spite of the conflicts that sometimes happen between us, we share the same pain [pause] we have one goal, one word. (Extract 9, Participant 9, M early-40s)

Evidence of the link between common fate and the shared experience of challenges among refugees was found in situations where refugees were treated as a group by others and the processes that Syrians go through together as refugees. These served to highlight their common circumstances and thus shared identity. One example comes from the blood test, which is a requirement for getting the Jordanian identity document for refugees. Refugees must go to a designated health centre during specific hours, where they wait together and are able to talk and see themselves as a category of people (Observation on February 7th, 2016).

Refugees also get this feeling of common treatment from similar situations in daily-life:

> P12: When I walk in the street and they start call me "You, Syrian. You are Syrian, this is a Jordanian, this is an Egyptian". This discrimination is suffocating us, and distressing. It

> makes us feel sympathy toward each other. When I see a Syrian refugee needs support, emotional support, practical support or material support, I will help them.
>
> Int: Do you feel belonging to refugees from your hometown, or refugees in general?
>
> P12: From all regions, all Syrians have the same pain, same goal. What I'm going through here, I'm not going through alone, all the Syrian refugees experience it, we all tasting the same glass. As an example, the Syrian worker is treated differently than Jordanian workers in salary, and they even give him the hardest work. (Extract 10, Participant 12, M mid-20s)

These constant negative reminders of the refugee identity seem to highlight and boost the sense of belonging toward others who share the same experience, among the participants. Living as a refugee in an urban setting (versus refugee camp) seems to enforce such sense of common fate and shared identity with other refugees due to the contrast with the locals and other nationalities who have different living conditions and legal situations compared to the refugees.

2. Different Forms of Support

We found evidence that being part of the refugee community helped the refugee facing all three types of secondary stressors (financial, environmental, and social). Although unexpected due to the poverty refugees suffer from, we found examples of refugees sharing items between them (e.g., furniture or medicine). Refugees in particular offered substantial support to new families moving in their area, by sharing an apartment with them and guiding them through whatever they needed to know about the new area and the services available to them. Social support was not only available among the refugee community, but was a priority to the Syrian

refugees who preferred to pay higher rent to stay living near each other.

As we were examining the processes establishing the basis for support, we grouped the forms of support we observed and heard about into three types: collective help, personal help and non-refugee identity-based help.

2.1. Collective help. We found examples of collective support, where the refugees came together as a group of refugees and helped fellow refugees. Some of these initiatives were improvised to meet a specific need of refugees while other initiatives were established to meet a sustained need of the refugee community. These forms of help in particular give us a clear example of how shared identity facilitates social support by empowering members of the group to be active agents to face common challenges. These included teaching after school classes to Syrian children, running extra-curriculum activities, and organizing aid caravans to the refugee tents on the outskirts (multiple observations). The following is an example of collective support that is formal and provides services usually offered by the NGOs:

> There was a group called Ahaad (عهد) started by Syrian students in Irbid got together to see what they can do. They get support from Jordanians but the members are Syrians and the beneficiaries also Syrians [pause] a student organization. We had a storage for food, clothes, toys and gas, etc. From time to time we would rent a playground, a bus and then ask the parents to take the kids to play for a full day programme [pause] we provided sandwiches, juice and water. The kids used to laugh and enjoy playing, and we used to give them gifts like colouring pens [pause] something simple and practical, then we take

> them back home. Also, from time to time we do go around and distribute aid in student cars. (Extract 11, Participant 1, M mid-20s)

A different form of collective initiative that tended to the needs of the refugees was helping them navigate through the bureaucratic and legal system of the host country. The first author witnessed a live example of such help; just after interviewing a participant who was, with a group of friends, providing legal help dealing with the local authorities, two young refugees came in asking for help for their relative who was arrested and scheduled for deportation (Observation, March 10th, 2016):

> I try to help with other friends [pause] I have a Jordanian friend. We've dedicated a year of our time and effort to help other refugees [pause] if anybody have a government procedure in Ministry of Interior or an embassy and have difficulties, we help to facilitate it (through connections) [pause] we make him feel solidarity. If a family got into any trouble we go there and try to solve it or provide help. (Extract 12, Participant 5, M mid-50s)

These examples of collective help are important evidence of the emergent sense of community among the refugees, as they require a high level of coordination, which appears to help with the common issues the refugees appear to struggle with the most. These collective initiatives also involve motives that go beyond doing a personal favour.

2.2. Personal help. On a daily basis, we found that the most common form of support refugees provided each other came in the form of personal help. This type of help was mobilized through personal relations and resources (e.g., neighbours) rather than organizational resources. In this case, we can see examples of support that draws from the social relations created by

displacement between refugees from different regions, who go through a common life experience.

> When a new Syrian refugee arrives, they know nothing. I have some stuff so I send it to them. when I get aid from charity, I would let him know. I would guide him to register for the UNHCR. (Extract 13, Participant 8, F mid-30s)

2.3. Other sources of help (not based on 'refugee' identity).

Values based. It is important to note that shared identity-based help was found to be the case among the majority of participants who participated in support. However, we also found three participants who helped Syrian refugees based on personal values, without sharing neither the common fate nor adopting the refugee identity:

> Int: Is there any change in your social relations now, compared to back in Syria?
>
> P13: No. In Syria I spent my time with relatives and same here. Cousins and uncles, nothing changed. I do have new relations, but mostly with people from [city of origin].
>
> Int: You said that you helped Syrian refugees. What made you do it?
>
> P13: I felt a duty [pause] people in need [pause] maybe a moral duty. National identity and such is all rubbish [pause] I help a human being, let aside the national nonsense. Maybe (I do it) as a good deeds [pause] it might not be even related to religion. I just feel it coming out of my soul, to help someone. (Extract 14, Participant 13, M mid-20s)

Although these interviewees offered alternative explanations for support among the Syrian refugees, two of the three participants provide evidence for how shared social identity stems

from common fate, as both participants came from rich families and had a relatively secure future. Indeed, they reported shared negative experiences (legal and discrimination) but it seems that they perceive their general situation as significantly different from average Syrian refugees.

Pre-existing social networks. Considering the tribal and conservative nature of southern Syrian culture, it was no surprise to find that family, tribal and regional social networks as an important source for support among Syrian refugees. However, only one participant reported that they offered support exclusively to his tribe members:

> Int: relations with Syrians?
>
> P2: Everybody mind his own business [pause] not that good. The strong relations are between relatives only, other Syrians is just saying hi to them [...] when I get a sponsor, I help my relatives.
>
> Int: any collective efforts or initiatives among refugees themselves?
>
> P2: maybe some one time thing like in Eid Aladhhaa (distribute meat) [pause] Just friends doing things together.
>
> Int: did you joined any?
>
> P2: No, I did not join such initiatives. Excuse me, but nobody asked me to. (Extract 15, Participant 2, M late-30s)

Except for one case where the participant who was not interested in supporting refugees other than his tribe, it seems that pre-existing networks are not in conflict with the networks of support formed in exile. In fact, and as in the case of collective funds established by expats (relatives of refugees), it seems that the newly formed social network facilitated the support and resources

provided by the pre-existing networks.

In order to examine if the "refugee" identity was the base of identification with other refugees rather than the pre-existing national "Syrian" identity, we used two pieces of evidence. First, the radical change in social relations of refugees in exile, where new connections have been formed with refugees from outside the previous traditional circles (region and class). Second, some refugees showed identification with other refugees who are not Syrian (e.g., Palestinians) because they went through the same situation.

Discussion

In the context of the insufficient services provided to the refugees by the International NGOs like UNHCR and local charities, we found that refugees provide informal help within the refugee community. We found that the majority of our participants considered themselves in one group with other refugees and provided support to them in many forms (collectively and personally). We did find cases were refugees did not offer help to other refugees or receive help from them, and in other cases help was offered based on personal motives like morality or constrained within tight circles of pre-existing familial or regional relations. Therefore, we want to emphasise that shared social identity does offer a valid explanation of support in the refugee community, as an important source among other sources of support.

However, we found identification with other refugees based on common challenges that arise from being a refugee as the most common pattern in our sample and observations. Some refugees disguised the "refugee" identity with the "Syrian" identity due to the stigma attached to being a refugee. We found evidence of radical changes in the social relations of refugees in exile, where new relations were formed with refugees from different regions and classes.

Syrian refugees in Jordan suffer from separation from their families and traditional social networks, which have a strong impact on their wellbeing that makes them consider going back to Syria even though the war is still going on. The refugees perceive their "refugee" status as of lower status than their Jordanian hosts, which causes them discomfort. The stigma attached to the "refugee" label is worsened by the negative attitude from some Jordanians (Athamneh, Momani, & Radaideh, 2016).

Extending the Social Cure

The interviews showed a range of ways that refugees face their needs ranging from being independent or getting help either on a personal or collective level. In addition to being a source of support, the analysis also showed that social relations could be a source of stress. We found that most of the social support reported by the participants was facilitated by new relations created in exile based on the shared refugee identity, and came in many forms and levels (personal and collective). It is worth mentioning that in some cases refugee-based relations were working in harmony and complementing pre-existing relations (e.g., distributing aid provided from relatives abroad).

The fact that social relations can be a source for both stress and relief fits the concept of *social cure* were "others can be hell or heaven", which emphasizes that it's not the mere act of giving or receiving that counts, but also relationship with the other (Haslam, Reicher, & Levine, 2012). High identification with other refugees was clear in the case of the participants who provided help to other refugees. Some of the participants even showed identification with other refugees who are not Syrian (e.g., Palestinians) on a base of common fate.

Research shows that in emergency settings those affected often consider themselves as

members of the same group and start to draw on this membership to be active agents to face the common challenges and provide help to each other (Drury et al., 2016; Williams & Drury, 2009). Shared social identity provides a basis for being motivated to give others (in the same group) support, for expecting support from them, and for being able to coordinate together to provide support for the whole group (Drury, 2012). The present study provides suggestive evidence that psychosocial support among refugees operates by a similar mechanism to what has been found in other emergency settings, since here too people without previous connections come to see themselves as members of the same social group or category and offer support on that basis.

Limitations

This study was designed to achieve a deep exploration in a small community seeking initial answers and suggesting hypotheses that should be investigated in further research. Thus, there are issues about generalizing the results of this study. We focused on urban refugees in developing countries mainly due to the fact that they constitute the majority of refugees globally (UNHCR, 2016a). We should be careful not to necessarily apply the results of this study to refugees in camps or in developed countries, as these setting vary in the type of challenges, including in social identity dynamics (e.g., between the refugees and the locals).

Additionally, the interview sample was small and not necessarily representative of other urban refugees, for two reasons. First, the neighbourhood that the ethnography took place in was not highly diverse, as the majority of the refugees (9 out of 13 interviews) were from the same region in Syria (Dara'a). Second, the researcher had a lower chance to do interviews with women (only 3 interviews) due to cultural restrictions on cross-gender private meetings.

Recommendations and Conclusions

We hope that we have shed some light on the possible role of shared social identity in psychosocial support among refugees of conflict in developing countries. Such understanding should help us recognize the capacities embedded in the refugee communities and design better community-level interventions that utilize the existing networks of support, or at least inform policymakers so they avoid undermining such mechanisms. Specifically, we recommend social identity-based interventions (e.g., countering social isolation), which have been found to be beneficial for mental health (Haslam, Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, & Chang, 2016). Based on this, we recommend that interventions can best utilise the capacity of refugees by including them in the intervention design and approaching them as a group, instead of as individuals. Field guidelines for practitioners working with refugees can also benefit by being aware of the positive role of shared "refugee" identity and how it can be empowering instead of stigmatizing. Indeed, refugees do help each other, but it is important to understand that refugees depend on external help, and they have a far greater capacity to do even better if provided with much needed resources.

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